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SUBJECT: OROMO OPPOSITION PARTIES FORM COALITION

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¶1. (SBU) The Oromo People's Congress (OPC) and the Oromo Federalist Democratic Movement (OFDM) recently formed a coalition which will allow them to combine resources, increase their strength, and better withstand government pressure in the run-up to the 2010 elections. The decision to join forces comes from pressure from their Oromo supporters to unite. The two parties are already fundraising together and will be establishing by-laws and a joint leadership by the end of December.

¶2. (SBU) The parties claim to share a common history and similar vision for the future, and their strategy is to use "quiet resistance" and civil rights awareness-raising activities to gain support. The OPC and OFDM decided to form a coalition, vice a merger, for two reasons. First, they fear that the Ethiopian Government (GoE) will feel threatened by the merger and attempt to intervene and manipulate the party, so they are first testing the waters with a coalition. This assumption is based on the experience of the Coalition for Unity and Democracy (CUD) party around the 2005 elections. When the CUD formed a coalition the GoE let them be, but when they started planning a merger the GoE promptly began to recruit and bribe non-committed individuals within the party essentially to gut the party from the inside. The OPC and OFDM leadership feel it would be wise to move cautiously. Also, because of the political party registration process, a merger would result in both parties permanently losing their names and emblems. If the merger didn't work out, it would be very difficult to return to the status quo ante. Second, there is not yet a sufficient level of trust between the two Chairmen. OPC Chairman Merera Gudina said that OFDM Chairman Bulcha Demeksa has drifted away from the consensus of the opposition on a few occasions (i.e. Bulcha sided with the EPRDF in the debate over whether the nomination list for the National Election Board should be limited) and is "not always predictable." Though mutual respect does exist between the two, caution is being taken to avoid mistakes. The OPC's membership in the United Ethiopian Democratic Forces (UEDF) coalition will not be affected by the formation of the OPC/OFDM coalition.

¶3. (SBU) The recent coalition formed by the OPC and OFDM will initiate the coming together of opposition parties, according to OFDM Chairman Bulcha Demeksa. He noted that opposition parties are "highly demoralized" and in order to have a chance at defeating the EPRDF each party will have to sacrifice something for the greater good. OPC Chairman Merera Gudina stated, "the only game in town is unity." Bulcha emphasized that the opposition parties are only asking for a level playing field, and urged donor countries to pressure Prime Minister Meles Zenawi and the GoE to open political

space.

¶4. (SBU) The OPC and OFDM are also part of another Opposition political coalition, the Forum for Democratic Dialogue in Ethiopia (FDDE, reftel), which has held weekly internal meetings for the past two months. They plan to start holding public discussions by the end of December, and around May 2009 they plan to start work on a Manifesto. Currently the FDDE is comprised of OPC, OFDM, Southern Ethiopian People's Democratic Coalition (SEPDC), Ethiopian Social Democratic Party (ESDP), Arena Tigray (AT), Somali Democratic Alliance Forces (SDAF), and individual members Seeye Abraha and Negaso Gidada. (Note: This is the first time that the Tigrayan, Amhara, and Oromo people have formed a political coalition within Ethiopia. End Note.) The Unity for Democracy and Justice (UDJ) party has not joined the coalition yet, but OFDM Chairman Bulcha Demeksa expects them to soon. Since the UDJ is largely an Amhara group the FDDE could help them gain support in non-Amhara regions, and the significant funding the UDJ receives from the Diaspora would be an asset to the FDDE. Bulcha said that if the UDJ joins the FDDE and the Forum emerges as a more explicit political coalition, rather than a dialogue forum as it is now, it could potentially be a strong opponent to the EPRDF in the 2010 elections.
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